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Катя Михайлова. Странстващият сляп певец просяк във фолклорната култура на славяните. (Katya Mihailova. The Wandering Blind Singer-Beggar in Slavic Folk Culture)**.** Sofia: Ab Publishing House, 2006. Notes. Illustrations. Appendix. 527 pp. ISBN 954-737-615-2 [In Bulgarian, with an abstract in English].

Two main facts emerge from a quick glance over the literature on the art and role of folk singers in Slavic folk culture: most of it is centered upon single ethnic groups, or upon a particular type of singer. Attention to heroic epics and heroic epic singers far outweighs that given to other folk genres and their performers. Yet, ironically, as the author argues, not many published texts of epics were collected from blind mendicant singers, their core repertoire consisting rather of religious and legendary epics.

Katya Mihailova's impressive monograph, a result of long term effort, focuses on the blind itinerant professional mendicant singer as a phenomenon common to all Slavic cultures. She distinguishes him from several other types of itinerant professional singers and from non-professional epic singers found all across Europe from the Middle Ages to the early 20th century. She then proceeds to an in-depth cross-cultural analysis of his semantics (ascribed cultural meanings), functions and repertoire across all major Slavic groups. A daunting task such as this has not been undertaken before. Katya Mihailova is well suited to the task by training as a Slavist and her experience as a folklorist and field worker at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences' Institute of Folklore.

The material on which this study is based is enormous. Primary sources are drawn from all major Slavic groups, especially Bulgarian, Serbian, Croatian, Macedonian, Russian, Ukrainian, Belarusian, Polish, Slovak, Czech. They include: (1) songs, tales, legends from the repertoire of mendicant singers, begging prayers, blessings and curses, secret signs, beggars' secret languages; (2) songs, tales, legends, rituals, in which the beggar features as a character, proverbs and sayings; (3) interviews with informants, eyewitnesses to the phenomenon; (4) travelogues, essays, memoirs, regional and area studies, etc., providing data on the biographies, lifestyle, customs and organization of mendicant singers; (5) church murals and other types of ecclesiastical art depicting singers and song themes; (6) material collected by the author through fieldwork in 1987-88 and 1999 (mostly Bulgarian, but also some Polish, Slovak and Ukrainian) – some texts, but also recollections of older people (the phenomenon ceased to exist in most Slavic countries, except Poland and

Ukraine, about 60 years ago); (7) material from numerous archives and museums in all Slavic countries - among the more rare and valuable are the manuscript collections of the Ukrainian National Academy of Sciences' Institute of Arts, Folkloristics and Ethnology in Kiev (especially the archives of Porfirii Martynovych and Kliment Kvitka); and the musical manuscripts collection of Matica Slovenska in Martin, Slovakia, from the 1970's and 1980's (the only comprehensive regional study of this kind in Slovakia); (8) published material on beggars in general and on mendicant singers in particular.

Discussing the main types of itinerant professional epic singers among the Slavs in the context of other European traditions from the Middle Ages and Early Renaissance, Mihailova takes into account the way in which each Slavic group through time has experienced varying degrees of cultural and historical influence on the part of the two major branches of European culture – Byzantine-Slavic and Western European. Four main types of singer are outlined, which meet the two main criteria - itinerant way of living and the practice of epic singing as a craft or profession. They are then distinguished based on the oppositions of 'high' vs. 'low' and secular vs. religious culture. Comparison of historical records about their existence reveals that the institution of professional mendicant singing has survived the longest among the Slavs and the South Slavs in particular as a result of the retention of a rural patriarchal way of life in the context of foreign domination. The main object of this study is thus differentiated from a wide range of other itinerant professional performers (troubadours, *trouvères,* minnesingers, *jongleurs, Spielleute,* minstrels, *skomorokhi,* vagantes, *goliardowie, dijaci, pivorezi,* etc.) as representing "low" religious art. It is also distinguished from non-professional epic singers, who remain rooted in their community, engage in farming like everyone else and have no special status. The case for this distinction is reinforced by the claim that only the itinerant blind mendicant singers maintain a vast obligatory repertoire of religious epics and enjoy special societal attitudes toward them. Among the Slavs, some representatives of this type of singer are the *dziady, zˇebráci, kaliki perehozˇie, nisˇtie starcy, starci, lirniki, kobzari, bandurysty, slepi guslari, bozˇeci, pitacˇi*.

The author compares the common beggar and the mendicant singer in terms of the kinds of cultural meanings socially ascribed to them. She concludes that they share the same traits – a sacred nature (an incarnation of a deity, a link with the world of the dead); poverty; physical disability precluding the option of normal labor and invoking special attitudes;

mobility (undertaking physical/spatial and symbolic transitions). However, the mendicant singer is additionally characterized by blindness (ordinary beggars may be sighted), possession of a home and family, even a wife and children, yet still earning a living by receiving alms for his art. He is also marked by different clothing and attributes, and, above all, by his stringed musical instrument, essential for his craft. The most important aspect of the two, Mihailova argues, is their conceptualization as mediators on a vertical as well as horizontal plane, between the world of the sacred and that of the profane (Heaven and Earth), between the relatively closed village community and the outside world.

The core repertoire of the mendicant epic singers, the author argues, is in direct relationship with the above characteristics, i.e. it is religious and legendary epics, and not heroic epics as is often assumed. Religious songs and begging prayers were a mandatory part of the training these singers underwent, without knowledge of which they could not practice their craft. This, however, is not a totally new revelation – Natalie Kononenko, for one, has argued the same for the Ukrainian minstrels. Still, the detailed analysis of most common themes and motifs and their symbolic meanings across all Slavic groups validates the argument for Slavic folk culture in general. It concludes that most songs are folkloric versions of three major genres of the official Christian literature – Gospel parables, exempla, and vitae of martyrs and hermits. The ideas of sin and retribution, charity, and norms of a righteous life on earth, as well as the fate of souls after death in the world beyond dominate in these songs. The eschatological theme of the Last Judgement, with its two sub-themes (individual punishment and punishment of entire peoples or humankind as a whole), is given particular attention. Its treatment in songs and church pictorial art are found to reveal an interesting dynamic between Christian norms and folk norms in the context of rural life. In the absence of an autonomous Church in Bulgaria under the Ottomans, for example, the author contends, there was no rigid distinction between official and unofficial Christian culture, thus resulting in a form of Christianity referred to as popular or folk Christianity. In such contexts, painters of village churches have tended to incorporate local lifestyles and traditions in their depictions of scenes from the Last Judgement, whereas these forms of pictorial art have also influenced verbal folklore. This, however, assumes perhaps too active and direct a role for the village folk, let alone blind mendicant musicians, to play as keen "observers" and discussants of religious pictorial art. The symbolic analysis of conceptualizations of Heaven and Hell, the soul's journey after death, the bridge to the other

world, is subtle and convincing – pointing out similarities and differences between pre-Christian and Christian notions.

The semantic analysis of this repertoire is complemented by a functional one tracing the kinds of use to which societies put mendicant singing as an institution. Time and place, of course, determine each performance and its dominant function, but, the author contends, all functions are usually intertwined and present to a greater or lesser extent. The liminality of the singers corresponds with the liminality of the times and places of their performances – during important religious holidays and festivals, periods of fasting (for Christmas and Easter), at life cycle rituals, etc. (i.e., during times of transition from a cosmic and societal perspective), and in front of churches, at the thresholds of homes, on roads, bridges, windows. The parallels and distinctions drawn by Mihailova between the actions, repertoire and conceptualization of mendicant singers and those of young adult men and women engaged in group seasonal rites found in all Slavic cultures (e.g., the Bulgarian *koledari* and *lazarki*, the Serbian *lazarice*, the Russian *v'iunoshniki*, the Polish *dziady smigustne*, etc.), are original and revealing. The following functions that mendicant singing performs are discussed: ethical and morally assertive, normative, socially integrative, ethno-consolidating, educative and patriotic (especially among the South Slavs under Ottoman rule, but also among the Ukrainians). Mendicant singers often functioned also as prophets, healers, advisers, mediators between the clergy and the laity, and even as a kind of church preacher.

The author also briefly outlines the gradual changes in the repertoire and functions of Slavic mendicant singers that have occurred since the late 1800's. Most of these changes mark a trend toward blending with another popular group of performers, the country fair singers. Societal attitudes toward them have also changed and have become more ambivalent.

Mihailova's study makes a number of significant contributions. It is the first comprehensive cross-cultural study on blind mendicant singers in Slavic folk culture. Continuous and well-founded parallels are drawn between the East, West and South Slavs. It introduces a great deal of new, unpublished material, both collected in the field by the author herself and derived from rare archival sources. Plausible evidence is presented for the existence in (Southwest) Bulgaria of blind mendicant singers contrary to many assumptions that South Slavic singers were sighted or merely the stuff of legend (Kononenko, Ukrainian Minstrels: And the Blind Shall Sing, ix, xi; Lord, The Singer of Tales: 18-20).

Evidence is also provided for the existence of the institution of mendicant singers in medieval Bulgaria. Yet, the author rejects the existence of schools for training such singers. Indeed, available data on the issue is inconclusive and the issue is still open for debate. Some of the other observations made in the study have already been made by others with regard to a single Slavic group, or to non-Slavic cultures, or other types of folk singers (cross-cultural variation is significant, but recurring patterns are common, see, e.g., Finnegan: Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance and Social Context, 170-213; Kononenko). However, the detailed and comprehensive analysis of the main issues across all Slavic cultures in the context of Byzantine and Western European influences, makes this book a valuable tool for all Slavists. The study certainly is of general interest, too, but readers with no knowledge of any Slavic language, as well as many Bulgarian readers, will find it difficult to navigate through texts and quotes for which no translation is available. All texts are given in the original language. One would probably wish that, when medieval Western Europe is discussed, there were less heavy a reliance on a few Soviet-era authors, reputable as they may be. It is unfortunate that the work does not include an index. Worse, there is no complete bibliography – references and notes are combined and placed at the end of each chapter making it difficult to grasp the scope of the consulted works. Also, in the absence of a general list of references, the way of citation is confusing at times, when, e.g., a reference is given as 'Op. cit.' and the previous full quote is several pages back (e.g., chapters 2 and 4, pp. 109 and 111; 229 and 231). These shortcomings, however, are, more or less, compensated for by an impressive appendix, which provides valuable additional primary material: 35 pages of mostly color photos of blind singers, beggars, musical instruments, church murals and icons; 30 pages of secret signs and vocabulary used by beggars; about 30 pages of begging prayers, blessings and curses; close to 60 pages of begging songs (including some archival recordings from the Poles'e region); beggars' religious tales and legends. Katya Mihailova's monograph marks a milestone in the area of Slavic folklore studies.

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